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C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 000229

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS AND DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/29/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: PRESIDENT LAUNCHES ANTI-CHILD SOLDIER  
CAMPAIGN

REF: A. COLOMBO 118

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 53

[1](#)C. 08 COLOMBO 1102

Classified By: Charge d' Affaires James R. Moore, for reasons 1.4(b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: On February 26 Charge attended the launch of the GSL campaign against child soldiers. In his remarks at the event President Rajapaksa focused on the LTTE's use of children in combat but pointedly singled out Eastern Province Chief Minister Pillaiyan in an oblique reference to the continuing problem of child soldiers in the TMVP. UNICEF's statistics on the number of child soldiers in the TMVP have continued to decline to 41 at the end of January but a clumsy January 22 "release" of children by the TMVP caused great frustration for the government and UNICEF. Police in the Eastern Province will now be empowered to secure the release of child cadres in the TMVP. End Summary

President Launches Campaign  
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[1](#)2. (U) On February 26, in front of senior government ministers, TMVP leader and Eastern Province Chief Minister Sivanethurai Chadranthana ("Pillaiyan") and Member of Parliament Vinayagamurthi Muralitharan ("Karuna Amman") President Rajapaksa launched the GSL's public information campaign against child soldiers. The event marked the GSL's fulfillment of one element of the Memorandum of Understanding (ref C) signed by the GSL, UNICEF and the TMVP in December to release child soldiers and prevent their future recruitment. However, instead of discussing the TMVP, the President focused his remarks on the incidents of child recruitment by the LTTE, saying that the use of child soldiers had "stained the image of Sri Lanka" and needed to be eradicated. During his remarks Rajapaksa did tellingly single out Pillaiyan, a former child soldier himself, and say that he (Rajapaksa) "knew that we can count on (the Chief Minister) in this campaign" an implicit reference to the still unfulfilled pledges by the TMVP to release all of their child cadres. The following day's press coverage of the speech spun Rajapaksa's remarks as an attack on UNICEF's "failure" to deliver child soldier releases by the LTTE, however UNICEF Country Representative Philippe Duamelle reported to Charge on February 27 that the President was angry at that characterization and intended to put out a statement supportive of UNICEF's actions in the country. Charge, who attended the launch, remarked on the professional quality of

the posters and radio and television spots that will air across the country to communicate the government's "zero tolerance" policy on child soldiers.

UNICEF's Numbers Decline but  
TMVP Commitment in Question  
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13. (C) In addition to the launch of the public information campaign, the growing coordination between UNICEF, the TMVP and the GSL has produced some movement on child releases by the TMVP. As Duamelle relayed to visiting SCA/INS Acting Director Kelly during her February 5-6 visit (ref A) the TMVP January 22 "release" of 15 child soldiers was "disappointing" since some of the fifteen had apparently been recruited that same day to inflate the number of releases for UNICEF. Despite that disappointment, UNICEF's child soldier figures have declined do to individual releases and children "age-ing out" by turning 18. At the end of January, 41 cases of children under 18 still serving in the TMVP were known to UNICEF. UNICEF's statistics also document very small but continuing cases new and re-recruitment of children each month. For example, in January UNICEF reported 2 cases of new recruitment and 4 cases of re-recruitment by the TMVP.

Eastern Police Now Empowered to Secure Releases  
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14. (C) As a result of the GSL's frustration with Pillaiyan, Karuna and the TMVP generally on child soldier releases, Justice Secretary Suhada Gamalath, the GSL point person on child soldiers, reported to DCM that the police in Eastern Province would now be empowered to secure the release of the children still being held in the TMVP.

15. (C) COMMENT: Both Duamelle and Gamalath, while expressing frustration over the halting progress could not say for sure whether the TMVP's bungled efforts to produce releases on January 22 was the result of incompetence or outright deception. Either way, both UNICEF and the GSL will now turn to the police to secure more releases. The actions taken on child soldiers since New Year's echo the halting progress that marked 2008. The GSL, including Karuna (Ref B) and Pillaiyan, have made strong oral commitments to end the use of child soldiers. The launch of the public information campaign is only the latest example of such efforts. The struggle has always been, and will remain, turning those words into deeds. While Post is encouraged that the overall number of outstanding cases known to UNICEF has dropped from 76 in June 2008 to 41 in January 2009, we remain concerned about the continuing low levels of new and re-recruitment and note that part of the drop in overall numbers is the result of still-serving cadres, who were recruited as children simply reaching their 18th birthday. Post will continue to work with UNICEF, the TMVP and the GSL to secure more releases and prevent future recruitment.

MOORE